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INNER MONGOLIAN SYRO-TURCICA I

Contextualizing the Syro-Turkic Gravestones from Inner Mongolia

TJALLING H.F. HALBERTSMA and MARK DICKENS

This article examines the corpus of Syro-Turkic Christian gravestones found in Inner Mongolia, with the overall purpose of placing them within a broader context of both Öngüt Turkic Christianity and other Christian gravestones found elsewhere in Central Asia and China. The text, translation, and a brief commentary are given for each Turkic inscription in Syriac script from the Inner Mongolian corpus for which the authors have legible images and/or rubbings, with a focus on the names and titles found on the gravestones. Special attention is given to Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33, which appears to mention the place where the deceased came from.

KEYWORDS: Syriac, Turkic, Öngüt, Inner Mongolia, gravestones, inscriptions

ABBREVIATIONS

TH = Tjalling H.F. Halbertsma

MD = Mark Dickens

INTRODUCTION

Following the late nineteenth-century discovery of a number of early Christian sites in Inner Mongolia, an extensive and varied corpus of Christian artefacts has been documented. One distinct category of these artefacts concerns a collection of around fifty sarcophagus-shaped Syro-Turkic¹ Christian tombstones originating from sites in today's districts of Damaoqi 大茂旗 and Siziwangqi 四子王旗.² The gravestones, positioned horizontally over the graves, commemorate Öngüt Turkic Christians, members of the Church of the East who lived during the Mongol period in what is today the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia, China.

¹ The term “Syro-Turkic” in this article refers to gravestones with inscriptions (where visible and legible) written primarily in the Turkic dialect spoken by the Öngüt Christians who left them, transliterated into Syriac script. In a few cases, these gravestones incorporate Syriac phrases. It should be noted that not all gravestones in the corpus have inscriptions.

² For an overview of this corpus, see Gai Shanlin 1992, pp. 270–312 and Halbertsma 2015, Appendix 5. Other Christian artefacts from Inner Mongolia include stone slabs, stone tablets with inscriptions and the so-called “Chifeng brick.” The latter was published in Hamilton – Niu 1994, pp. 147–155.

Many (but certainly not all) of these sarcophagus-shaped gravestones are decorated with crosses (sometimes referred to as “Nestorian crosses,” resembling Maltese crosses or Georgian Bolnisi crosses), floral motifs and abstract patterns, accompanied by short Turkic inscriptions written in Syriac script. Readings and translations of these inscriptions have appeared from the 1940s onwards; indeed, new inscriptions and interpretations continue to be published to this day. In contrast to more diverse Christian gravestone inscriptions from elsewhere in Central Asia and China,³ with few exceptions the Inner Mongolian inscriptions follow a very simple formula. They are 1) introduced by the phrase ܒܗ ܩܒܪܐ , *bu qabrā*, “this grave,”⁴ 2) followed by the name (and occasionally an ecclesiastical position or other title) of the deceased and 3) concluded by the phrase ܐܝܢ ܗܝܬ , *-ning ol*, “is that of,” indicating grammatical possession of the grave by the deceased; this formula was first noticed by the Danish Turcologist Kaare Grøenbech, who also noted the use of the Syriac letter ܐ (normally used for the sounds /p/ and /f/) for the sound /b/ in Turkic words (in order to avoid potential confusion by using the Syriac letter ܒ , which is pronounced either /b/ or /v/ depending on its position in a word).⁵

The purpose of this article is to place the Syro-Turkic gravestone inscriptions from Inner Mongolia within a broader context of both Öngüt Christianity (especially regarding identifications such as names, titles or associations) and the overall corpus of Christian gravestones found elsewhere in Central Asia and China, specifically Semirechye (modern-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) and, to a lesser extent, Almaliq (Xinjiang, China) and Quanzhou (medieval Zayton, China). Text and translation of most known gravestone inscriptions in the Inner Mongolian corpus will be provided, including several that have only been published previously (but not discussed) in the second edition of *Early Christian Remains of Inner Mongolia* (hereafter *Early Christian Remains*), by co-author Tjalling H.F. Halbertsma (hereafter TH).⁶ Attention will be paid to the general language, names, and titles found in the Inner Mongolian inscriptions. Of particular interest, due to the apparent inclusion of a place name associated with the deceased, is a new reading by co-author Mark Dickens (hereafter MD) of Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 from the Inner Mongolian gravestone corpus, originating from Wangmuliang 王墓梁 and published in the second edition of *Early Christian Remains* by TH.⁷ This object is therefore discussed in more detail below, in order to further document the Turkic Christian heritage of Inner Mongolia.

³ On which, see Dickens 2009 and Lieu *et al.* 2012.

⁴ Syriac speakers would pronounce the Syriac loan-word as *qavrā* or *qawrā*, but we do not know how Turkic speakers would pronounce it.

⁵ Grøenbech 1940, p. 306.

⁶ Inscriptions that are not covered in the present article will be addressed in a forthcoming article, “Inner Mongolian Syro-Turcica II,” by the same co-authors: Halbertsma 2005/2015 nos. 11, 17, 18, 31, 57; Niu 2008/2010, nos. 2, 6, 7; Gai Shanlin 1992, Pl. 157, no. 10; Pl. 161, nos. 7, 33, 73, as well as the gravestone mentioned below from the “Genghis Khan: Wereldveroveraar te paard” exhibition in the Netherlands.

⁷ Halbertsma 2015, p. 421.

DISCOVERY AND DOCUMENTATION OF THE SYRO-TURKIC CHRISTIAN GRAVESTONES FROM INNER MONGOLIA

The first Öngüt Christian sites and objects from eastern Inner Mongolia were discovered at the end of the nineteenth century by missionaries of CICM, also known as “Scheutisten.”⁸ The missionaries, named after the order’s original headquarters at Scheutveld in Belgium, documented Christian crosses rising from lotus flowers or altar tables, chiselled into stone columns. At the time, no inscriptions were recorded.⁹

In 1927, during Sven Hedin’s Sino-Swedish Expedition, the major Öngüt Christian site now known as Olon-Süme was discovered in central Inner Mongolia. Although Hedin probably did not recognize the Christian origins of the site, Olon-Süme would offer a wealth of Christian remains, including various inscribed steles and sarcophagus-shaped gravestones. Following Owen Lattimore’s identification of the site as “a ruined Nestorian city” in 1934,¹⁰ Canadian explorer Desmond Martin identified yet another group of Öngüt Christian sites in 1936 in the vicinity of Olon-Süme, including the settlements and cemeteries of Bitchik Jellag, Shabe Khuren, Ulan Baishing, Wangmuliang – which Martin called Wang-mu 王墓 – and Mukhor Soborghan. Of these sites, Wangmuliang contained the most gravestones, including gravestone no. 33, to be discussed below.¹¹

Martin documented the sites and their Christian remains for the first time in his seminal 1938 *Monumenta Serica* article entitled “Preliminary Report on Nestorian Remains North of Kuei-hua, Suiyüan.” He included a short description of each site, accompanied by a map of the overall area, plans for each site visited (although regrettably the plan for Wangmuliang was lost before publication), line drawings and photographs of the stones and other artefacts discovered (see [Plate 1](#) below).

Some four decades later, Chinese archaeologist and later politician Gai Shanlin 盖山林 documented these and further sites and objects in his detailed Chinese language publication *Yinshan Wanggu* 阴山汪古, or “The Öngüt of the Yin Mountains.”¹² Since then, a number of Chinese and international scholars have made contributions to the documentation of Turkic Christian sites and objects from Inner Mongolia.

GRAVESTONE INSCRIPTIONS FROM *EARLY CHRISTIAN REMAINS OF INNER MONGOLIA*, SECOND EDITION

The gravestones containing the following inscriptions were all included in a survey of the Inner Mongolian gravestones by TH published in *Monumenta Serica* in 2005, but without any discussion of the Syro-Turkic inscriptions. The 2015 second edition

⁸ CICM represents Latin *Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae* (*Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*), a Belgian Catholic missionary order that operated in China (and particularly Inner Mongolia) from 1863 until the early 1950s.

⁹ For a chronology of these discoveries, see [Halbertsma 2015](#), pp. 75–81.

¹⁰ [Lattimore 1934](#).

¹¹ Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 can be found in [Martin 1938](#), Fig. 7 and Pl. VIII c (“Stone 2”); as noted below, no inscription is visible in either the drawing or the photograph.

¹² [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, nos. 49–51.

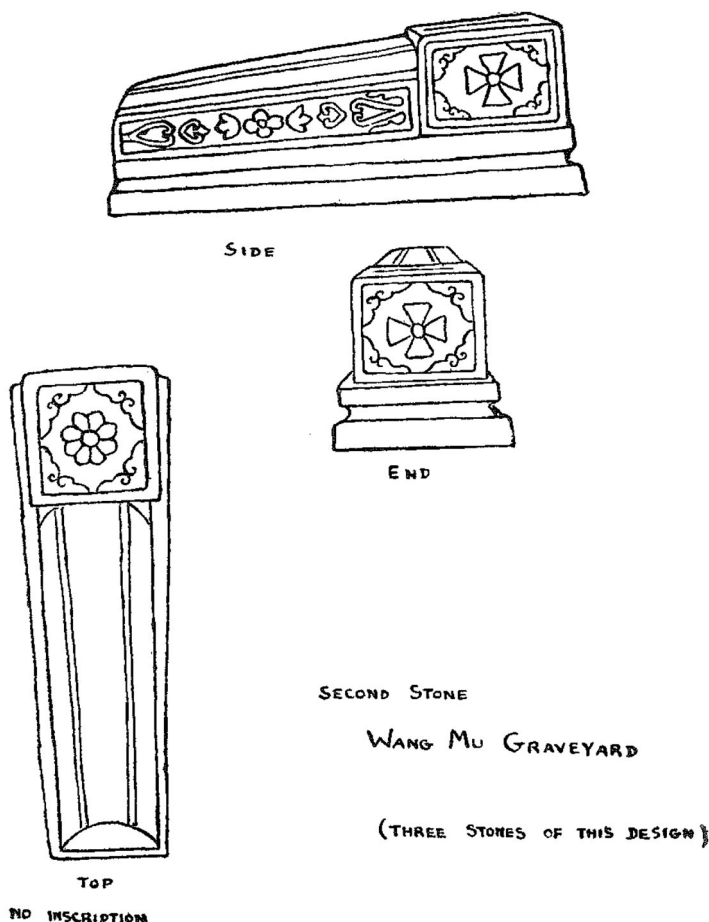


Fig. 7

PLATE I: Martin 1938, Fig. 7.

of *Early Christian Remains* included the Syriac text and an English translation by MD of the following inscriptions. Some of these had been published previously, but not all had been deciphered and translated. The numbering system is that used in the 2005 survey and the second edition of *Early Christian Remains*.¹³ In order to distinguish the stones in the following list from those found in the list below from the works of Niu Ruji 牛汝极 (2008/2010), references to the former appear as e.g., Halbertsma no. 8 and to the latter as e.g., Niu no. 8.

It should be noted that of the 70 Christian artefacts listed in *Early Christian Remains*, 41 (nos. 1–37, 67–70) are gravestones or fragments thereof and one (no. 57) is a funerary stele. The other artefacts are stone slabs, bricks, cones or

¹³ In a few cases, minor changes have been made in the current article in the readings and/or translations originally published in the second edition of *Early Christian Remains*.

base plates. Thus, 60% of the artefacts are clearly funerary in nature. However, inscriptions are only discernible on 11 of the gravestones and the stele. There must have been inscriptions on many of the remaining gravestones, but they are no longer visible due to weathering, upside-down location (e.g., nos. 4, 6) or use as building materials (e.g., nos. 28, 37). Moreover, partial inscriptions are visible on images of some of the gravestones in the corpus which are not included in the list below, but they would probably require examination *in situ* to decipher them (e.g., nos. 11, 17, 18, 31). Following are the discernible inscriptions, with the caveat that MD has not seen any of these in the field; what follows is the result of examining images and rubbings of the gravestones and consulting the work of other scholars who have worked on the inscriptions, notably Gai Shanlin, Pier Giorgio Borbone and Niu Ruji. Thus, some readings are less certain than others and there is undeniably room for improvement in some of the following interpretations.

No. 8: ܕܐܪ ܕܝܘܨܝܬ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܬ

This is the grave of Yawseph (Joseph) the Priest

Images previously published: Halbertsma 2005, p. 146; Halbertsma 2008/2015, Colour Pl. 44–46¹⁴

Comment: The biblical name Joseph does not occur in the other gravestone corpora.¹⁵ The designation ܡܪܝܬܐ, *qaššišā*, “priest” occurs commonly in the Semirechye corpus, as it does in the Öngüt corpus. See also nos. 15, 16, 21, 22 below.

No. 12: ܕܐܪ ܕܝܠܝܒܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ

This is the grave of Elišba' (Elizabeth) Qatun

Images previously published: Halbertsma 2005, p. 155; Halbertsma 2008/2015, Colour Pl. 54–57 (inscription visible in Pl. 57).

Comment: The biblical name Elizabeth occurs eight times in the Semirechye corpus, twice on the Almalīq stones¹⁶ and once in the Quanzhou corpus (Y1, actually from nearby Yangzhou).¹⁷ The Sogdian loan-word into Turkic ܩܬܘܢ, Qatun or Xatun – meaning variously “lady, wife, wife of the ruler, queen” – is found seven times on the Semirechye stones,¹⁸ once on the Almalīq stones,¹⁹ four times on the Quanzhou stones (Y1, B19, B23 and B50)²⁰ and below on the gravestone published by Pier Giorgio Borbone and nos. 5 and 8 published by Niu Ruji. On all these gravestones, it is typically an honorific title of respect for married women, not an indication of royal blood. The letter ܩ, which occurs frequently on the Öngüt gravestones, is discussed below under Halbertsma no. 30. Note that this inscription is not the same as Niu no. 8, also mentioning ܩܬܘܢ.

¹⁴ Colour plate numbers in the first and second editions of *Early Christian Remains* are identical, hence the listing here as Halbertsma 2008/2015.

¹⁵ Here and elsewhere referring to the Semirechye, Almalīq and Quanzhou gravestones.


¹⁶ Kokovtsov 1907, no. 2; Niu 2008/2010, no. 7.

¹⁷ Chabot 1906, p. 288; Lieu *et al.* 2012, pp. 172–174.

¹⁸ Chabot 1906, p. 290, spelled ܩܬܘܢ.

¹⁹ Kokovtsov 1906, no. 2; Niu 2008/2010, no. 7.


²⁰ Lieu *et al.* 2012, pp. 172–174, 192–194, 131–132, 210–212.

No. 15: 

This is the grave of Buqra the Priest

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 55; [Halbertsma 2005](#), p. 159

Inscription previously published: [Niu 2008/2010](#), no. 12.

Comment: Buqra (or Buyra) is a common Turkic male name meaning “foal/stallion of a camel.”²¹ It does not occur in the other gravestone corpora. Note that Niu reads the name as .

No. 16: 

This is the grave of Awgen (Eugene) the Priest

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 70 and 161, no. 71; [Halbertsma 2005](#), pp. 161, 163, 164; [Halbertsma 2006](#), Illustr. 1; [Baumer 2016](#), p. 204; [Halbertsma 2008/2015](#), Colour Pl. 63

Inscription previously published: [Niu 2006](#), pp. 222–223; [Niu 2008/2010](#), no. 14

Comment: Mar Awgen (fl. 4th c.) was an Egyptian who was instrumental in the spread of Christian monasticism in Syria and Mesopotamia. The name is not found in the other gravestone corpora.

No. 21: 

This is the grave of Emmanuel the Priest

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 43; [Halbertsma 2005](#), pp. 171, 172; [Halbertsma 2008/2015](#), Colour Pl. 69;

Inscription previously published: [Niu 2008/2010](#), no. 11; [Borbone 2008](#), no. 2; [Borbone 2015](#), p. 222


Comment: The biblical name Emmanuel also does not occur in the other gravestone corpora.

No. 22: 

This ... is the grave of Estepanos (Stephen) the Priest

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 57; [Halbertsma 2005](#), p. 174; [Halbertsma 2008/2015](#), Colour Pl. 42–43 (inscription not visible);

Inscription previously published: [Niu 2006](#), p. 223; [Niu 2008/2010](#), no. 13; [Borbone 2008](#), no. 7; [Borbone 2015](#), p. 223

Comment: The biblical name Stephen occurs only once in the Semirechye corpus.²² As Borbone notes, this is one of only two known exceptions to the standard formula used on these Öngüt Christian gravestone inscriptions; instead of the aforementioned Turkic phrase , *bu qabrā*, “this grave” the inscription begins with

²¹ [Rásonyi – Baski 2007](#), pp. 169–170.

²² [Chabot 1906](#), p. 288.

Syriac ܐܢܐ, *hānaw*, “this is” and ends with a Turkic possessive ending *-si* on Syriac *qabrā*, resulting in ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ, *qabrāsi*, “the grave of.”

However, there is a largely illegible word between ܐܢܐ and the name ܫܬܝܥܢܐ, *Stephen*. Given the rather confused mixture of Syriac and Turkic grammar on this stone, could it be another word representing “grave” or rather “the grave of” (since word-final ܐ is visible)? Although the standard Syriac ܡܕܝܬܐ, “his grave” would potentially fit, the visible shapes seem to rule it out. Alternatively, could it be Syriac ܩܒܪܐ, “shrine, grave” or Turkic *toplu*, “grave” (possibly rendered in Syriac script as ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ) with ܐ replacing the final vowel in each case? Either way, this would be a non-standard way of rendering the typical opening phrase in these inscriptions and would involve a certain amount of duplication, given the presence of the phrase “the grave of” at the end of the inscription. Another possibility based on visible letters (but less semantically satisfying) is ܩܘܠܐ, Turkic *qul*, “slave, servant” with the aforementioned Syriac pronominal suffix ܐ to indicate possession. This would result in the phrase “This is the grave of the slave/servant of Estepanos (Stephen) the Priest,” but the idea of preparing a gravestone for a nameless individual seems counter-intuitive. The spelling of ܩܘܠܐ in Niu 2008/2010 is erroneous.

No. 23: ܕܐܢܐ ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ ܕܬܘܢܓܐ ܡܚܝܐ ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ

This is the grave of Tonga-mahi the Visitor

Images previously published: Halbertsma 2005, pp. 176, 177; Halbertsma 2008/2015, Colour Pl. 42 (inscription not visible)

Inscription previously published: Niu 2008/2010, no. 26

Comment: The reading of this name is somewhat uncertain, but if correct, it is a typically Turkic male name. *Tonga* denotes “panther, leopard, brave hero” while *Mahi* derives from *mah*, “moon.”²³ The Semirechye corpus contains a similar name, albeit female (often the case with Turkic names referencing the moon): ܬܘܙܘܢ ܡܚܝܐ, *Tuzun-mahi*.²⁴ The first element ܬܘܢܓܐ, *Tonga* is found in nine stones from the same corpus.²⁵ Note that this is the first occurrence of an ecclesiastical title that is higher than “priest.” The term ܩܪܐܝܬܐ, *s’orā*, can be understood in several ways, as “church visitor, periodeutes or chorepiscopus”; the essential duty of this cleric was to visit villages as a representative of the local bishop. Note the missing genitive ending ܐܝܬܐ, *-ning* before the final verb ܕܐܢܐ. Niu 2008/2010 reads this as ܕܐܢܐ ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ ܕܬܘܢܓܐ ܡܚܝܐ ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ.

No. 29: ܕܐܢܐ ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ ܕܫܪܓܝܫ ܩܒܪܐܝܬܐ

This is the grave of Sargis (Sergius) the Archdeacon

Images previously published: Halbertsma 2005, p. 186

Inscription previously published: Niu 2008/2010, no. 23; Borbone 2008, no. 6; Borbone 2015, pp. 222–223

²³ Rásonyi – Baski 2007, pp. 778, 520.

²⁴ Chwolson 1890, no. 97,¹ (numbering system used by Chwolson in his 1890 catalogue). Chwolson interprets the name as ܬܘܙܘܢ ܡܚܝܐ, *Tuzun-mahi*.

²⁵ Chabot 1906, p. 289.

Comment: The Christian saint Sergius was very popular throughout the Syriac-speaking world; the name is found no less than 14 times in the Semirechye corpus, once in the Almaliq corpus²⁶ and once (B28) in the Quanzhou corpus.²⁷ The deceased commemorated by this gravestone had the highest ecclesiastical position found in the Öngüt gravestone corpus; archdeacons were higher than visitors, but lower than bishops. Again, as Borbone notes, this is the other known exception to the standard Öngüt Christian gravestone formula; in this case, the inscription contains Syriac ܡܢ ܗܐ ܩܒܪܗ , *hānaw qabreh*, “this is the grave of” (the formula commonly used on the Semirechye gravestones) instead of the usual Turkic ܐܗ ܡܢ ܩܒܪܐ , *bu qabrā*, “this grave” found on most Öngüt gravestones. In contrast to Borbone’s reading of ܕܠܗܝܬܗ , the image suggests ܕܠܗܝܬܗ (i.e., with *yodh* between *kaph* and *daleth*).

No. 30: ܐܗ ܡܢ ܩܒܪܐ ܕܠܗܝܬܗ ܩܘܫܢܢܝܚ

This is the grave of Hadutha Qušnanč

Images previously published: Martin 1938, Fig. 6 and Pl. VIII a-b; Murayama 1963, Abb. 1; Gai Shanlin 1992, Pl. 161, no. 22 and 161, no. 23; Halbertsma 2005, p. 188

Inscription previously published: Murayama 1963, p. 24; Niu 2006, p. 224; Niu 2008/2010, no. 9

Comment: The Syriac word ܠܗܝܬܗ , *Hadutha* means “joy, gladness”; as a female name it occurs only twice in the Semirechye corpus.²⁸ The following word ܩܘܫܢܢܝܚ , *Qušnanč* is one of several variants of ܩܘܫܬܢܝܚ , *Quštanč*, the feminine form of a Sogdian word meaning “elder, teacher.” Note the presence of two distinct letters in this word; the initial ܩ is adapted from either ܩ (*kaph*) or ܥ (*e*) and represents either /q/ or /x/ in Iranian or Turkic words; by contrast, the final letter ܫ (when used in words of Iranian or Turkic origin) is pronounced /č/, not /š/ as in classical Syriac. Contrary to the idea of previous generations of scholars who dealt with the Semirechye gravestone corpus (where the term occurs frequently in combination with female names), it has no relation to the Latin names Constance (female) or Constans (male), which are invariably spelled with an initial Syriac *qoph* (ܩ), not the distinctive letter ܩ used here.

It is not entirely clear from the gravestones where *Quštanč* occurs whether it functioned as an onomastic element or a title indicating a pedagogical role in the community.²⁹ For other examples of the same name/title in this corpus, see Halbertsma no. 70, as well as Niu nos. 17, 19, 27, 28. The first scholar to accurately decipher the inscription on this gravestone was the Japanese linguist Shichirō Murayama, who rendered it as “Xedutha Kustanč,”³⁰ in contrast to the incorrect suggestion by Yoshirō Saeki that it should be read as “Surta Koshtanz.” Murayama also discussed the issue of whether such names were “double names” or combinations of a personal

²⁶ Kokovtsov 1906, no. 6.

²⁷ Chabot 1906, p. 292; Lieu *et al.* 2012, pp. 189–191.

²⁸ Chabot 1906, p. 289.

²⁹ For discussion of this word, see Sundermann 1995; Zieme 2006; Zarshenas 2013. For a quick summary, see Dickens 2009, pp. 29–31.

³⁰ Murayama 1963, p. 24, Murayama 1964.

name and a position or profession.³¹ Niu 2006 and Niu 2008/2010 misread the name as 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏, *Qadota*, corrected in Borbone 2008.³²

No. 33: 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 (𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏) 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏

This is the grave of Qustus (Constans) of Soborghon

Images previously published: Martin 1938, Fig. 7 and Pl. VIII c; Gai Shanlin 1992, Pl. 161, no. 51; Halbertsma 2005, p. 196; Halbertsma 2008, Pl. 5.2 (332)

Inscription previously published: Niu 2008/2010, no. 20

Comment: This inscription is discussed below in a separate section, but here it can be noted that the name *Constans* is not found in the other gravestone corpora. It should also be noted that the reading of the two words rendered here as *Constans of Soborghon*, although reasonably certain, is open to question. Niu 2008/2010 reads the “name” as 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 and translates it in French as “maîtresse Solqun.”

No. 70: 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏

This is the grave of Šowhar Qušnanč

Images previously published: Halbertsma 2005, pp. 243, 244; Halbertsma 2008/2015, Colour Pl. 65–68 (inscription visible in Pl. 66)

Inscription previously published: Niu 2008/2010, no. 25

Comment: The reading of the name before the title or onomastic element is not definite; indeed, if correct, it is somewhat enigmatic. *Qušnanč*, as noted above, indicates a female name, but *Šowhar* is a Persian word (شوهر) meaning “husband”; it does not occur in the other gravestone corpora. Niu 2008/2010 reads the name as 𐰆𐰺𐰍𐰏[𐰆].

GRAVESTONE INSCRIPTIONS FROM OTHER PUBLICATIONS

With one exception, the gravestones containing the following inscriptions were all included in Niu Ruji’s “cross-lotus” collection of “Nestorian” inscriptions and documents from China, which appeared in a 2008 Chinese edition (*Shizi lianhua* 十字蓮花) and a 2010 French edition (*La croix-lotus*). The section on inscriptions from Inner Mongolia is found on pp. 67–102 in the 2008 edition and on pp. 162–205 in the 2010 edition. Otherwise, the numbers used for each gravestone are identical between the versions. None of these inscriptions were included in the aforementioned studies by TH. The one exception to inclusion in Niu’s work is a stone kept in the Musée Guimet, Paris (the only known Öngüt Christian gravestone located outside of China),³³ published initially in 2005 by Catherine Delacour and Alain Desreumeaux and then in 2015 by Pier Giorgio Borbone:

³¹ Grænbech 1940, pp. 307–308.

³² Borbone 2008, p. 3, n. 8.

³³ We exclude an unidentified Öngüt Christian gravestone and the so called “Chifeng Brick” which were at the time of writing on display in the temporary exhibition “Genghis Khan: Wereld-veroveraar te paard,” National Military Museum, Soesterberg, The Netherlands (18 February – 27 August 2017).

[ܐܠܗ] ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ (ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ) ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ

This is the grave of Ara-oghul Qatun

Images previously published: [Delacour 2005](#), p. 90; [Borbone 2015](#), pp. 229–231

Inscription previously published: [Delacour 2005](#), p. 91; [Borbone 2015](#), p. 226

Comment: The proposed name of the deceased (ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ), *Ara-oghul*, is problematic, as discussed by Borbone. Here, MD makes one change to Borbone's reading, namely ܐܪܐ in place of ܐܪܐܝܬ, since the former is the typical way of transliterating Turkic *Qatun*, “lady.”

As noted above, the remaining gravestone inscriptions have been published in various publications by Niu Ruji. The Syriac transcriptions and consequent translations below are based on the illustrations and transcriptions reproduced in [Niu 2008/2010](#), informed where possible by images from Gai Shanlin's aforementioned work. Images and/or interpretations of the inscriptions published by others besides Niu are only noted if they exist.

No. 3: ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ

This is the grave of Giuvargis (George) the archdeacon

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 2

Inscription previously published: [Borbone 2008](#), no. 1; [Borbone 2015](#), p. 222

Comment: Saint George was an extremely popular saint in the Christian East, including Central Asia. His name is found on 28 gravestones in the Semirechye corpus,³⁴ one from Almaliq³⁵ and one from Quanzhou (B21).³⁶ Note again the ecclesiastical position of *archdeacon*, the highest position found on both the Öngüt and the Semirechye gravestones.

No. 4: text above and below box:

ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ

This is the grave of Yuḥannan (John) Beg

text in box:

(ܐܪܐ) ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ (ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ) ܐܪܐ ܕܩܬܘܢ

Deacon Beg (Čapiq?) (of the) Öngüt (?)

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 157, no. 8

Inscription previously published: [Borbone 2008](#), no. 3

Comment: This inscription, which exists only in a rubbing published by Gai, is different in form from most other gravestones in this corpus; it consists of a box with text written inside it and surrounding it. The name *Yuḥannan* is very common on the

³⁴ [Chabot 1906](#), p. 288.

³⁵ [Niu 2008/2010](#), no. 2.

³⁶ [Lieu et al. 2012](#), pp. 203–204.

Semirechye gravestones, accounting for at least 34 of the stones in that corpus. The Turkic name *Beg* (originating in a title generally meaning “lord”) is a good example of the way that Syriac and Turkic onomastic elements are mixed together in these inscriptions. The deceased is referred to as “Deacon Beg” inside the text box; the name *Beg* is followed by another word (name?) that seems to be spelled ܒܝܓܝܬܐ – since it is not a recognizably Syriac name, initial ܒ is pronounced /č/. Final ܐ should be pronounced /g/ but possible names that would fit here all end in the similar sound /q/.³⁷ The middle letter is problematic; ܒ in Iranian languages should be pronounced /f/, but likely Turkic names contain instead the similar sounds /p/ or /b/. Other than the suggested *Čapiq* (“scab, mildew”), other possible Turkic names that might fit visible letters are *Čapraq* (“silver ornament”), *Čariq* (“rawhide sandal”) or *Čibiq* (“stick, rod, twig, branch”).³⁸ Although the end of the final word in the box is unclear (ܒܝܓܝܬܐ), it seems to start with the letters ܒܝܓܝܬܐ and most likely is related to the ethnonym *Öngüt*. We may compare the designation that was given to the Öngüt monk Rabban Marqos (ܡܪܝܬܐ ܡܪܩܘܨ) when he was elevated to the metropolitanate ܡܬܪܒܐܢܐ ܡܪܩܘܨ, “of Cathay and of Öng.”³⁹ The former location, better pronounced as *Katai* and reflecting the earlier Khitai dynasty, refers to northern China.⁴⁰ The latter refers to the traditional territory of the Öngüt Turks.⁴¹

No. 5: [ܐܠܐ] ܒܝܓܝܬܐ ܒܝܓܝܬܐ ܒܝܓܝܬܐ [...] ܒܝܓܝܬܐ [...] ܒܝܓܝܬܐ [...] ܒܝܓܝܬܐ

This is the grave (of) ... praise (blessing) ... praise (honour, glory) ... Sansiz/Sensiz Qatun

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 157, no. 7

Comment: Like no. 4 above, this inscription only exists in the rubbing made by Gai and, with four vertical lines extending down from the base of a cross, is not in the typical form encountered in the Öngüt gravestone corpus. [Niu 2008/2010](#) understands the third line to include the name ܐܠܬܐ, Altun, “gold,” but if the reading proposed here is correct the inscription contains two words for “praise,” Turkic ܒܝܓܝܬܐ, *ālqišliq*, and Syriac ܒܝܓܝܬܐ, *tešbohta*. The female name of the deceased – ܒܝܓܝܬܐ – pronounced either *Sansiz*, “countless, innumerable” or *Sensiz*, “without you” – is found on four stones in the Semirechye corpus, where the name was variously read by Chwolson as ܒܝܓܝܬܐ, ܒܝܓܝܬܐ or ܒܝܓܝܬܐ.⁴²

No. 8: ܐܠܬܐ ܒܝܓܝܬܐ ܒܝܓܝܬܐ ܒܝܓܝܬܐ ܒܝܓܝܬܐ

This is the grave of Elišba ‘(Elizabeth) Qatun (Qalin Qong-čoy)

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 5

Comment: This is not the same as [Halbertsma 2005](#) and 2015 no. 12. It is unclear from the images how accurate the proposed phrase is that follows the name “Lady Elizabeth” or indeed what it might mean.

³⁷ However, to indicate /q/ it would be more common to use the letters ܩ or ܩܐ.

³⁸ [Rásonyi – Baski 2007](#), pp. 192, 193, 202.

³⁹ [Bedjan 1895](#), pp. 28–29, translated as “Metropolitan of the See of Katī [i.e., Kathay, or Northern China] and Öng [i.e., Wâng, or Huâng]” in [Budge 1928](#), p. 148.

⁴⁰ See [Pelliot 1959](#), pp. 216–229.

⁴¹ See [Borbone 2005](#), p. 18.

⁴² [Chabot 1906](#), p. 292.

No. 10: ܐܒܝܢ ܒܝܬ ܕܥܡܪܐ [ܐܒܝܢ ܒܝܬ ܕܥܡܪܐ]

This is the grave of ... Beg

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 53

Comment: Since less than half of the inscription is preserved on this fragment, we do not know the first component of this deceased male's name. On the name/title *Beg*, see Niu no. 4 above.

No. 15: ܐܒܝܢ ܒܝܬ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܫܝܢܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ

This is the grave of Šekintha Šārin

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 39

Comment: Syriac ܥܡܪܐ, *Šekintha*, means a tabernacle, temple or other place that can be inhabited by the divine, as well as the visible glory of God, especially when he inhabits such a place. It does not occur in the other gravestone corpora and is presumably a female name, based on its grammatical gender. But for the very obvious final letter *nun* (ܢ), one is tempted to read the word after *Šekintha* as ܫܕܐ, *Šādi*, representing Persian شادی, “joy, rejoicing” a female name attested to in Syriac sources.⁴³ However, ܥܡܪܐ is more likely a misspelling of ܫܝܢܐ, *Širin*, representing Persian شیرین, “sweet, melodious,” a popular name in the Persian-speaking world and attested to in Syriac sources, including three times in the Semirechye corpus.⁴⁴

No. 16: ܐܒܝܢ ܒܝܬ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܝܠܝܬܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ

This is the grave of Julitta (Yuliṭa) the believer

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 13

Comment: The 4th century Christian saint Julitta (who was martyred with her son Cyriacus) always appears as ܝܠܝܬܐ or ܝܠܝܬܐ in Syriac texts. There are six occurrences of the name in the Semirechye corpus.⁴⁵ Niu Ruji's transcription should be corrected as follows: ܝܠܝܬܐ to ܝܠܝܬܐ and ܕܥܡܪܐ to ܕܥܡܪܐ.

No. 17: ܐܒܝܢ ܒܝܬ ܕܥܡܪܐ ... ܕܥܡܪܐ ... ܕܥܡܪܐ

This is the grave of ... Qušnanč

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 35

Comment: [Niu 2008/2010](#) proposes the name ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ, *Kugmanta* (?) before ܕܥܡܪܐ, *Qušnanč*, but this is unlikely. The name is very difficult to read from Gai's rubbing, but could possibly be a compound name with the first element *Xudā/Xudāy* (either ܕܥܡܪܐ or ܕܥܡܪܐ in Syriac) – a word of Sogdian origin meaning “lord” – possibly ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ, *Xudāy-berdi*, “the Lord has given”⁴⁶ – the same meaning is behind the Syriac name ܕܥܡܪܐ, *Yahbalaha*. The presence of

⁴³ Gignoux *et al.* 2009, p. 128.

⁴⁴ Gignoux *et al.* 2009, p. 132; Chabot 1906, p. 293. Although the Persian name ܫܝܢܐ, *Šāhin* (شاهین, royal falcon) would fit the visible letters better, this is exclusively a male name, on which see Gignoux *et al.* 2009, p. 129.

⁴⁵ Chabot 1906, p. 290.

⁴⁶ Rásonyi – Baski 2007, pp. 289–290. This reading is still somewhat speculative.

Qušnanč indicates the deceased was a female. There is another illegible word ending in 𐰽, just before the genitive ending 𐰽𐰸, *-ning*.

No. 18: [𐰽𐰸] 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸 ... 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸

This is the grave of (Türäm?) ...

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 37

Comment: Again, most of the text between 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸 and [𐰽𐰸] 𐰽𐰸 is illegible, including the reading of *Terim* proposed by Niu. Although it is tempting to see this female name, derived from a title referring to a “highborn (noble) woman”⁴⁷ and occurring in the Semirechye gravestone corpus at least ten times,⁴⁸ it almost certainly is not part of this inscription. Rather, the name immediately before the genitive suffix 𐰽𐰸 is 𐰽𐰸(𐰽)𐰸; the most likely Turkic names that would fit are *Taçam*, *Tuyam*, *Tutam* or *Türäm*.⁴⁹ Of these, the last (meaning “my lord”) is the best fit orthographically (to the indeterminate second letter) and semantically; it is not found in the other gravestone corpora. The other components of the name preceding this word are currently indecipherable; the gender of the deceased is unclear.

No. 19: 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸 [𐰽𐰸] 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸

This is the grave of ... Qušnanč

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 10

Comment: Unfortunately, Gai’s rubbing is too indistinct to make out much more than the first and last word. Although MD follows [Niu 2008/2010](#) here, the reading is problematic.

No. 21: [𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸] 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸

This is the grave of El-Temur

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 161, no. 29

Comment: Again the rubbing is very difficult to read. The name (following Niu’s reading) is speculative, but appears to be a Turkic name meaning either “(dark) red-iron” or more likely “country/people-iron.” It is found amongst the Uyghurs (12th–14th c.), Mamluks (14th c.) and Bulgars (13th c.)⁵⁰ and occurs once in the Semirechye gravestone corpus.⁵¹

No. 22: [𐰽𐰸] 𐰽𐰸 [𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸] 𐰽𐰸 𐰽𐰸

... Aleksand[ros] (Alexander)

Images previously published: [Gai Shanlin 1992](#), Pl. 157, no 3, reproduced in [Halbertsma 2008](#), p. 319

⁴⁷ Rásonyi – Baski 2007, p. 740.

⁴⁸ Chabot 1906, p. 289.

⁴⁹ Rásonyi – Baski 2007, pp. 696, 788, 804, 810 (with ref. to p. 786).

⁵⁰ Rásonyi – Baski 2007, pp. 42, 255.

⁵¹ Chabot 1906, p. 288.

Comment: Due to the fragmentary nature of this inscription, it is unclear if the name is that of the deceased or part of the Seleucid calendrical formula,⁵² but the latter is more likely; such dating formulae often start with Alexander's name in Syro-Turkic inscriptions and there are many more instances in the gravestone corpora of this than of the name *Aleksandros* being that of the deceased.⁵³ The second line, consisting only of three letters (ܐܝܬܐ, *ayk* ...) may be the initial part of a Turkic compound name beginning with *Ay*, "moon."

No. 27: ܐܝܬܐ ܕܝܘܗܢܐ ܕܩܘܫܢܐܢܝܬܐ

This is the grave of Yohana (Joanna) Qušnanč

Comment: This biblical name does not occur in the other gravestone corpora.

No. 28: ܐܝܬܐ ܕܝܘܠܝܬܐ ܕܩܘܫܢܐܢܝܬܐ

This is the grave of Julitta (Yuliṭa) Qušna(n)č

Comment: Curiously, [Niu 2008/2010](#) renders the name as ܝܘܠܝܬܐ, but as noted above, it should be ܝܘܠܝܬܐ, *Julitta (Yuliṭa)*.

COMMENTARY ON NAMES, TITLES AND GENDER DIVISION OF THE CORPUS

Despite the short and simple formula used in the inscriptions found on these sarcophagus-shaped gravestones of Inner Mongolia, the corpus as a whole reveals some valuable insights into the composition of the Turkic Christian community of Inner Mongolia, summarized in the [Table](#) below. However, it must be noted that these insights concern the elites of the communities concerned. Deceased of less prominence were not buried in such elaborate graves marked by gravestones.

The corpus comprises twenty-six individuals: thirteen males, twelve females and one of indeterminate gender. It is striking that the gender ratio in those commemorated on the gravestones is nearly 1:1. Also striking is the fact that there is no discernible difference between the graves of males or females comprising this group of Turkic Christian elites; only the inscriptions indicate the sex of the deceased.

Most of the names found on the gravestones have a Christian origin (Constans, Elizabeth, Emmanuel, Eugene, George, Joanna, John, Joseph, Julitta, Sergius, Stephen), including nouns used as names in Syriac Christianity (Ḥadutha, Šekintha). Although these names are in the majority, they are supplemented by names of Persian (Širin, Šowhar) or Turkic origin (Ara-oghul, Buqra, El-Temur, Sansiz/Sensiz, Tonga-Mahi, Tūrām). It is also notable that a number of the names of Syriac origin (Elizabeth, George, John, Sergius) are frequently encountered in the other gravestone corpora, particularly that of Semirechye. Thus, these Christian

⁵² Syriac texts and inscriptions traditionally use this dating system, beginning on 1 October, 312 BCE. Although it dates from the reign of Seleucus I, more than 11 years after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE), it is often attributed to Alexander in Syriac texts.

⁵³ For examples of Alexander's name in the dating formula in Syro-Turkic inscriptions, see [Chwolson 1890](#), nos. 21,¹; 28; 48,⁴; 48,⁵ (all on pp. 139–141); [Chwolson 1897](#), nos. 69; 74; 76; [Kokovtsov 1906](#), no. 11; [Kokovtsov 1907](#), no. 2; [Kokovtsov 1909](#), nos. 1; 2; [Lieu et al. 2012](#), Y1; B17; B19; B20; B22; B50. By contrast, ܐܠܝܝܬܐܝܪܐ, *Aleksandros* as a personal name occurs in the Semirechye corpus only once: [Chabot 1906](#), p. 288. In the Öngüt gravestone corpus under consideration here, it also occurs in [Niu 2006](#), pp. 220–222; [Niu 2008/2010](#), no. 2, a stone not addressed in this article.

TABLE
LIST OF NAMES AND IDENTIFICATIONS ON SARCOPHAGUS-SHAPED GRAVESTONES
AND ONE TABLET ⁵⁴ INCLUDED IN THIS PUBLICATION

Object	Name	English	Sex	S	A/Q	Identification	English
MG	Ara-oghul	“adornment / bee / saw” + “son”	f	—	—	Qatun	Lady
H16	Awgen	Eugene	m	—	—	Qašišā	Priest
N22	Ay-K ...	“moon”	m	—	—	—	—
H15	Buqra	“camel”	m	—	—	Qašišā	Priest
H12	Elišba ‘	Elizabeth	f	8	2 / 1	Qatun	Lady
N8	Elišba ‘	Elizabeth	f	8	2 / 1	Qatun	Lady
N21	El-Temur	“(dark) red-iron” or “country / people-iron”	m	1	—	—	—
H21	Emmanuel	Emmanuel	m	—	—	Qašišā	Priest
H22	Estepanos	Stephen	m	1	—	Qašišā	Priest
N3	Giwargis	George	m	28	1 / 1	Arkidiyakon	Archdeacon
H30	Ḥadutha	“joy”	f	2	—	Qušnanč	Elder /teacher
H33	Qustus	Constans	m	—	—	d-Soborghon	“of Soborghan”
N5	Sansiz / Sensiz	“countless” or “without you”	f	4	—	Qatun	Lady
H29	Sargis	Sergius	m	14	1 / 1	Arkidiyakon	Archdeacon
N15	Škintha Širin	“tabernacle” + “sweet”	f	3 (Širin)	—	—	—
H70	Šowhar	“husband”	f	—	—	Qušnanč	Elder /teacher
H23	Tonga-Mahi	“Panther-Moon” or “Hero Moon”	m	9 (Tonga) 1 (Mahi)	—	S‘orā	Visitor
N18	Türäm	“my Lord”	?	—	—	—	—
N27	Yohana	Joanna	f	—	—	Qušnanč	Elder /teacher
N4	Yuḥannan	John	m	34	—	Beg	Lord
N16	Yuliṭa	Julitta	f	6	—	Mhaymantha	Believer
N28	Yuliṭa	Julitta	f	6	—	Qušna(n)č	Elder /teacher
H8	Yusuf	Joseph	m	—	—	Qašišā	Priest
N10	—	—	m	—	—	Beg	Lord
N17	—	—	f	—	—	Qušnanč	Elder /teacher
N19	—	—	f	—	—	Qušnanč	Elder /teacher

Key to Table:

“English” refers to the equivalent English name or an English translation of the name’s meaning.

A = Number in Almaliq corpus

H = Gravestone from [Halbertsma 2005/2015](#)

MG = Gravestone from Musée Guimet

N = Gravestone from [Niu 2008/2010](#)

Q = Number in Quanzhou corpus

S = Number in Semirechye corpus

⁵⁴ N21 in the table.

names were commonly found in Christian communities spread throughout the medieval Central Asian Turkic world.

Another feature of the gravestones that gives us interesting insights into the community (or at least the elites) is the presence of titles or other descriptive identifiers on most of the gravestones from Inner Mongolia. Of the twenty-six individuals commemorated, five are Priests, one is a Visitor and two are Archdeacons (we pass over “Beg,” which likely is an onomastic element in the two gravestones where it occurs). In contrast to these eight males, eleven females are identified with descriptors which indicate their status in the community (or possibly one of their names); four have the title Qatun (“Lady”), six the title Qušnanč (“Elder, Teacher”) and one the descriptor “Believer.” Although it is unclear whether Qatun and Qušnanč were merely terms of respect for women in the community or indications of a more formal position in local society or in the Christian community, it is nonetheless significant that women in the community do not seem to have lower status than males, although there are no female clergy represented (understandable, due to standard practice in the Church of the East). The one exception concerns the aforementioned inscription “Constans of Soborghon,” where the identification seems to have functioned as an onomastic element indicating a locality associated with the deceased. This inscription and identification is therefore discussed in more detail below.

WANGMULIANG GRAVESTONE NO. 33

Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 (see [Plate 1](#) above and [Plates 2–3](#) below), marking the grave of the already mentioned Constans of Soborghon, is of particular interest, due to the apparent inclusion of a place name associated with the deceased. The gravestone is one of seventeen discovered and documented at the gravesite of Wangmuliang. The stone is chiselled from a solid sand-coloured granite rock and is 113 cm long, 33 cm wide and 40 cm high. Like the other Öngüt Christian gravestones of Inner Mongolia, this one is also “sarcophagus-shaped,” in contrast to Christian gravestones found elsewhere in Central Asia and China, which are typically shaped as tablets or columns or are simply smooth stones (often referred to as “pebbles”), unworked by stone masons.⁵⁵

Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 features a unique pattern on the side panels of the main body of the gravestone, consisting of a central flower flanked on each side by symmetrical leafed patterns and two further spade or heart-shaped designs rotated sideways (see [Plate 3](#) below). The front and side panels at the head of the gravestone each depict a “Nestorian cross” with triangular arms set in a circular ornamented frame. The top panel at the head of the stone, viewed from above, also has a similar frame enclosing a single flower with eight petals. The fixed base, with a deep and wide edge, is less common in the gravestone corpus.

Regarding the distinct decorations on the aforementioned side panels, the majority of depictions on gravestones from Inner Mongolia feature wave and flower or vine motifs. The spade or heart motif and patterns on the side panels of Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 are unique and enable it to be easily identified. However, the style of the crosses, flower depictions and frames on this gravestone

⁵⁵ For the latter, see [Dickens 2009](#).



PLATE 2: [Halbertsma 2015](#), Gravestone 33.

are frequently found on gravestones from Wangmuliang and other sites in Inner Mongolia.⁵⁶ In comparison to gravestones from other sites in Inner Mongolia, such as Mukhor Soborghan, the decorations on the stones from Wangmuliang reveal an especially fine quality of workmanship. Similarly, the stone consists of a

⁵⁶ See for instance [Halbertsma 2015](#), no. 32.

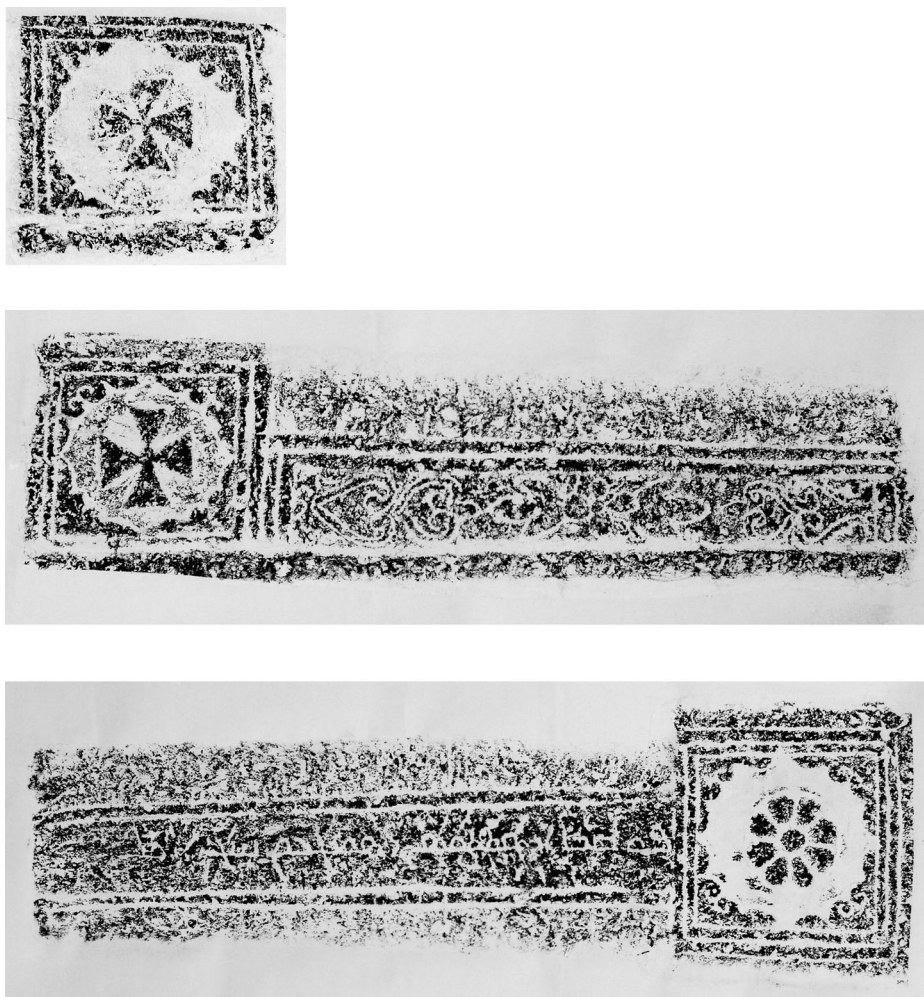


PLATE 3: Halbertsma 2015, Gravestone 33.

very hard and durable granite, wearing much less than some of the extremely eroded gravestones at other sites, including the aforementioned objects from Mukhor Soborghan. This craftsmanship, as well as the quality of the rock, has contributed to the outstanding preservation of the inscription on the stone, which ranks among the best preserved objects in the corpus.

The site of Wangmuliang, where this gravestone was encountered, is situated on a hill overlooking the Shara Muren River (also known in Chinese as the Tabuhe 塔布河). The remains of a settlement known in Chinese as Boluobansheng 波羅板升 are situated to the north-west, on the opposite bank of the river, a little over two kilometres away.⁵⁷ It is thus not unlikely that the two sites were connected. In 1936, Martin recorded a wealth of grave material at Wangmuliang, including a Chinese

⁵⁷ Martin refers to the site as Boro Baishing.

style spirit-way with sculptures of officials and animals, an extensively inscribed tablet with headstone and seventeen sarcophagus-shaped gravestones.⁵⁸ Most of the graves recorded by Martin had been disturbed or looted. Importantly, Martin documented and published the stele on the site through photography. The title inscribed in the headstone of the stele was translated in 1938 by Chen Yuan 陳垣 as “Tablet on the Spiritual Way of Lord Yeh-lü 耶律, administrator of the Yelikewen 也里可溫”; the latter term describes Christians (primarily of Mongol-Turkic or other Central Asian origin) under the Yuan dynasty.⁵⁹ Of particular interest is the fact that, based on his name, this administrator was a member of the former Khitan royal house and thus distantly related to such key individuals in the Mongol administration as Yelü Ahai, Yelü Tuhua and Yelü Chucai.⁶⁰

The line drawing of Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33, made by Martin’s associate Bettina Lum, depicts the left, top and front sides of the stone, including its “Nestorian cross” and its highly distinctive decorative patterns.⁶¹ The photograph of the gravestone published by Martin is less clear, although the stone’s distinct decorations remain visible. Surprisingly, no mention is made in Martin’s article of the fine inscription depicted on the top of the gravestone. This may have been due to the fact that the stone was unearthed at the site; perhaps the inscription remained filled with earth and simply went unnoticed by Martin and his associates.

Some four decades later, in 1970, gravestone no. 33 was again documented at Wangmuliang by Gai Shanlin. Gai included the object, with an extensive collection of other source and context material, in his aforementioned comprehensive publication *Yinshan Wangu*.⁶² Importantly, in addition to his photographs, Gai also made rubbings to document the stones, rather than line drawings. The rubbings cover the entire right side of the stone, with the highly distinct motifs, and the top side of the stone. Importantly, the rubbing of the top side depicted an inscription, though the rather small reproduction of the image hampers interpretation. Later publications by Chinese scholar Niu Ruji have included reprints of Gai’s rubbings but, regrettably, no further rubbings, photographs or other documentation have been published.⁶³

When Gai excavated the site in the 1970s, sixteen of the twenty-one graves he identified and excavated had been disturbed and looted. Gai generally described the site as a walled terrace along the Shara Muren River, measuring some 75 by 75 m, with a spirit way comprising seventeen gravestones organized into two rows and the inscribed stele. Gai interpreted the site as a family cemetery. During his excavation of the graveyard, Gai noticed that the heads of the deceased were placed towards the West, as if the deceased were lying facing East. The gravestones were also positioned with the cubic head-end of each to the West (meaning that the deceased buried underneath was buried looking East, reflecting a common Christian custom,

⁵⁸ For some of these sculptures see Halbertsma 2009.

⁵⁹ Mechelen 2001, p. 91.

⁶⁰ Chen 1938, pp. 255–256; Atwood 2004, pp. 599–601.

⁶¹ Years later, Bettina Lum would publish her own travelogue on the visit, using the pseudonym Peter Lum: Lum 1981.

⁶² Gai Shanlin 1992, Pl. 161, nos. 49–51.

⁶³ See for instance Niu 2008/2010, no. 20. Niu 2010 lists the gravestone as “Balingmiao and Wangmuliang 20,” and as “non retrouvée,” suggesting that he worked from the rubbings published by (or in the possession of) Gai, rather than the stone itself.

especially in the Church of the East).⁶⁴ Among the objects found inside the graves, Gai discovered coins from the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) periods.⁶⁵ Since none of the sarcophagus-shaped gravestones from Inner Mongolia are dated, these coins provide important evidence for dating these artefacts. We know with certainty that the Öngüt were Christians during the Yuan period, but it is less clear when Christianity was established amongst them. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Öngüt were Christians before the advent of Mongol rule and it has recently (and plausibly) been suggested that the Öngüt may in fact be the Christians who converted to Christianity in the Muslim year 398 AH (1007/1008 CE), rather than the Kerait who have traditionally been associated with that conversion event.⁶⁶

Sadly, when TH conducted fieldwork at the site from 2001 onwards, Wangmuliang had been thoroughly destroyed by grave robbers and local farmers.⁶⁷ The graves had been dug up by hand or even bulldozers, though a few much damaged yet recognizable fragments of Turkic Christian gravestones and spirit way sculptures remained on the site. Fortunately, Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 and related material had already been moved to Hohhot. In 2003 TH documented Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 with rubbings, photographs and measurements. By then the stone had been removed from Wangmuliang and transferred to the storage facility of the Hohhot Cultural Relics Bureau in the Inner Mongolian capital of Hohhot. The rubbings, made by Chinese archaeologist Wei Jian 魏堅, depict the right, front, and (importantly) top side of the stone (thus including the inscription). In 2005 this new documentation was published as Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 in TH's extensive *Monumenta Serica* article on the gravestones, followed by the first edition of *Early Christian Remains* (2008).⁶⁸ A new reading and translation of the inscription by MD was offered in the second edition of *Early Christian Remains* (2015).

THE SYRO-TURKIC INSCRIPTION ON WANGMULIANG GRAVESTONE NO. 33

The inscription on Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 follows the standard formula found on nearly all Öngüt gravestones: ܕܐܪ ܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܩܘܨܬܐ , “This is the grave of Qustus (Constans) of Soborghon.” However, this stone appears to differ from others found in Inner Mongolia, in that rather than a title, position or profession, the name is followed by a location. This is not unheard of amongst the Semirechye gravestones, but when it occurs, the place of origin is usually expressed using the Syriac gentilic ending ܐܪܐ , -āyā (m)/ܐܪܬܐ , -yāthā (f). In seven cases, the deceased is described as ܐܪܡܠܝܓܝܐ /ܐܪܡܠܝܓܝܐ , *Almaligāyā* (m) or ܐܪܡܠܝܓܝܬܐ , *Almaligyāthā* (f) “a native of Almalig.”⁶⁹ However, there are no other examples of what Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 seems to indicate.

The name Constans (Latin for “constant, steadfast”) reminds us primarily of the Roman emperor Constans I (r. 337–350), the third son of Constantine the Great

⁶⁴ Thus churches are oriented West–East, with the altar at the East end, since worship must be done facing East, reflecting the following saying of Jesus: “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:27).

⁶⁵ Gai Shanlin 1992, p. 73.

⁶⁶ Atwood 2014, based in part on Hunter 1989/1991.

⁶⁷ See Halbertsma 2015, Pl. 112–118.

⁶⁸ See Halbertsma 2005, pp. 194–196; Halbertsma 2015, pp. 421–423.

⁶⁹ Chwolson 1890, nos. 98; 99; 3,³; 3,⁵; 11,¹; 11,²; Chwolson 1897, no. 261.

(r. 306–337) who reigned jointly with his brothers Constantine II (r. 337–340) and Constantius II (r. 337–361). As noted above, the name is unique among the Turkic Christian corpus in Inner Mongolia. There are several recorded Syriac spellings of the name (also used in reference to other individuals recorded in Syriac texts): ܡܠܬܝܠܝܢܐ, ܡܠܬܝܠܝܢܐ, ܡܠܬܝܠܝܢܐ, ܡܠܬܝܠܝܢܐ, ܡܠܬܝܠܝܢܐ.⁷⁰ The spelling ܡܠܬܝܠܝܢܐ on Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33 is slightly different,⁷¹ but it may be that the loop signifying a second letter *waw* (ܐ) has been conflated with the two loops in the next letter *semkath* (ܐ).

The interpretation of “Soborhōn” as a place name, or rather as a locality associated with Constans – for instance as his place of birth, the domain he governed or otherwise – is interesting in view of the Turkic Christian site in Inner Mongolia of Mukhor Soborhōn.⁷² Martin, who documented the site in 1936, explains that the site took “its name from the hill, which, to the Mongols, looks like a pagoda without a top (Mukhor Soborhōn = the pagoda without a top), and in the course of time the appellation of the hill also came to be that of the neighbouring ruin.”⁷³

Martin describes Mukhor Soborhōn as “positioned on the bank of the Khoto Gol river and sheltered from north eastern winds by the hill, enclosed by four earth walls of around 500 meters each and lacking inner city walls.” Martin documented “two stone blocks with decorations and crosses in relief” inside the walls and a cemetery with similar stones outside the north-eastern wall. He noted that the stones were cruder than those finely worked ones encountered at Wang mu (Wangmuliang).

In 1974 Gai also extensively documented Mukhor Sorboghān, referring to the site in Chinese as Muhu’ersuobugan 木胡儿索卜干 and dating it to the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan periods.⁷⁴ At the site, Gai discovered new Turkic Christian remains unnoticed by Martin, including a large stone dome decorated with “Nestorian” crosses which may have been part of a stupa.⁷⁵

When co-author TH documented Mukhor Soborhōn from 2001 onwards, many of the crudely shaped sarcophagus-shaped stones were used as building material in nearby wells or farm walls. The site itself had been thoroughly looted and damaged, though some bricks and fragments within the city wall had remained. Today, various objects and gravestones from the site are scattered over cultural heritage storage facilities and museums in Bailingmiao, Baotou, Hohhot and Zhaohe.

MD’s “Soborhōn” and Martin’s “Soborhōn” both bear a similarity to Mongolian “soborogh” (Сыврага), the word for “stupa” or “pagoda,” but it is the resemblance between the identification and site which is striking here. Indeed, it could well be that Constans, despite his burial at Wangmuliang, hailed from the historic Turkic Christian settlement now known as Mukhor Soborhōn.

⁷⁰ Payne Smith 1879–1901, col. 3549–3551.

⁷¹ But see Payne Smith 1879–1901, col. 3675, which opens up the possibility that this is a variant spelling of the name.

⁷² Another (less likely) interpretation would be that Soborhōn refers here to a family or lineage.

⁷³ Martin 1938, p. 240.

⁷⁴ Gai Shanlin 1992, pp. 120–122.

⁷⁵ Halbertsma 2015, p. 179.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article has been to discuss and contextualize new readings and interpretations of Syro-Turkic inscriptions from Inner Mongolia offered by MD. The Inner Mongolian corpus of Christian gravestones demonstrates that the Öngüt Turkic culture of Inner Mongolia drew upon a broad world of cultural influences. The combination of Turkic language, Syriac script, and names of Arabic, Persian, Turkic and Syriac origin found in the inscriptions is shared with other medieval Christian Turkic communities in the region, especially those from Semirechye. However, the overall design of the gravestones and the simple format of the inscriptions are unique to the Öngüt Christians of Inner Mongolia.

Despite the brevity of the inscriptions on these gravestones from Inner Mongolia, examination of the names and titles recorded in them, including those that deviate from the norm, such as the inscription found on Wangmuliang gravestone no. 33, offers valuable insights into a community which commemorated the coexistence of Turkic and Syriac, clergy and laity, male and female in a way that affirmed the equality and unity of all the Christians thus memorialized.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

內蒙古的敘利亞文—突厥語文件 (上)——內蒙古所出土的敘利亞—突厥語墓碑考

本文考察在內蒙古所發現的敘利亞—突厥語的基督徒墓碑銘文，藉著將它們置於較寬廣的語境，即汪古突厥語基督教及在中亞或中國其它地方所發現的基督教徒墓碑的異同，來探討其總體意義。作者根據所收集到的可讀的影像或拓片，提供了以敘利亞—突厥語銘文的文本、翻譯、及簡短註解。分析焦點集中於墓碑上的名字及稱謂。其中，值得注意的是第三十三號王木良的墓碑，因為它提到了死者的出處。

關鍵字：敘利亞文、突厥語、汪古部、內蒙古、墓碑、銘文

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